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The Invisible Hand Made Visible: "The Birth-mark"

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THE question of Hawthorne's relation to allegory has excited and plagued critics ever since his short stories first appeared in the early 1830s. It even bothered Hawthorne himself, who in 1854 wrote to his publisher James T. Fields: "Upon my honor, I am not quite sure that I entirely comprehend my own meaning in some of these blasted allegories."[1] Following Hawthorne's own lead, contemporary readers continue to wrestle with the problem of Hawthorne and allegory and have come up with a variety of compelling explanations, all of which assume as their point of departure that Hawthorne was indeed experimenting with traditional allegory in order to create a new kind of allegory. The agreement ends there, however, as one cultural critic maintains that Hawthorne "modifi[ed] a sacrosanct Puritan form by mixing it with contemporary themes and styles" in order to "suit modern needs," while another critic, with a more formalist perspective, argues that Hawthorne "apparently adopts the allegorical mode in order to

[1]Letter to James T. Fields, quoted in J. Donald Crowley, "Historical Commentary," in *Mosses from an Old Manse,* vol. 10 of *The Centenary Edition of the Works of Nathaniel Hawthorne,* ed. Crowley, Fredson Bowers, et al. (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1974), p. 522. All quotations from "The Birth-mark" are from this edition and appear in the text.

turn it against allegorical intentions."[2] Although both of these views contribute to a greater understanding of Hawthorne's recasting of traditional allegory, I shall suggest yet another explanation, in which allegory functions as part of a cultural apparatus that produces middle-class subjects and, in so doing, reveals itself as dialogically engaged with one of the most powerful technologies the nineteenth century had for producing subjectivity—the developing market economy in antebellum America.

If on the one hand allegory functions as a reminder of

[2]David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), p. 39; and Michael Davitt Bell, *The Development of American Romance: The Sacrifice of Relation* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 134. While I am sympathetic to these readings, both fail to historicize the relation between Hawthorne and allegory. Whereas Bell's formalism explicitly disengages itself from historical concerns, Reynolds's argument, while addressing specific cultural issues, ultimately fails to be historical enough. This essay aims to combine the rigors of Bell's close readings with the broad cultural analysis suggested by Reynolds. Most recently, Joel Pfister has read Hawthorne's career in terms of the production of the middle-class self in nineteenth-century America. Like Pfister, I find "The Birth-mark" to be a crucial text in Hawthorne's career and in the reconfiguration of allegory in nineteenth-century America. But rather than reading it as "an allegory about the way in which Hawthorne's own writing is complicit with and critical of a cultural process that discursively produces the female body as pathological" (*The Production of Personal Life: Class, Gender, and the Psychological in Hawthorne's Fiction* [Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1991], p. 38), I see an identification between Hawthorne and Georgiana against Aylmer, who is committed to making invisible the signs both of authorial and female labor. Whereas the burden of Pfister's task is to historicize the psychological self in Hawthorne's time, my aim is to show the inextricable relation between constructions of the self and the development of the market economy in this period. In " 'The Bloody Hand' of Labor: Work, Class, and Gender in Three Stories by Hawthorne" (*American Quarterly*, 42 [1990], 542–64), Nicholas K. Bromell underscores the theme of work in "The Birth-mark" but does not consider the relation between allegory and work. Also see Donald E. Pease's work in which he suggests that Hawthorne's allegory "transfigures actual persons, places, and things into exemplary forms, cultural resources whose mold can be recast for future cultural use" (*Visionary Compacts: American Renaissance Writings in Cultural Context* [Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987], p. 65), and Walter Benn Michaels's discussion of *The House of the Seven Gables* in which he situates Hawthorne's experiments with the romance in the context of antebellum notions of property in order to argue that while "imagining the terms of a text that would escape republican fluctuation, Hawthorne imagined in fact the terms of the technology that made those fluctuations possible" ("Romance and Real Estate," in *The American Renaissance Reconsidered: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1982–83*, ed. Donald E. Pease and Walter Benn Michaels [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1985], p. 177).

traditional texts (Bunyan, of course, would be the most obvious candidate in the case of Hawthorne) and a repository of traditional values, it becomes on the other hand a departure point for radically untraditional configurations of subjectivity that bear little relation to the religious world of Bunyan. Informed by the structure of the market, this subjectivity is produced and reproduced by acts of exchange and conquest, along the lines of the model of selfhood offered by C. B. Macpherson, in which he claims that selves are constituted in the market according to a logic of possessive individualism.[3] This marketplace formulation of individualism figures selves as territories whose boundaries are continually being drawn and redrawn by acts of appropriation and loss. Characterological selves in Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark" powerfully exemplify this model of individualism, with the body becoming the locus of these territorial raids. In this story a husband sacrifices his wife's life for the sake of erasing a birthmark, which he feels to be the only thing standing between her and perfection. It is possible to read Georgiana's birthmark, or what the narrator calls "this fairy sign-manual" (p. 38), as making visible and assigning a secure place to what should be, according to the logic of the free market, invisible, fluctuating, and placeless. Aylmer experiences the independent life of the birthmark as a diminution of both his sexual and economic power, which can only be resuscitated by the scientific erasure of "the Crimson Hand" (p. 39). In bringing a halt to the instability and power of the market as it manifests itself on the female body, Aylmer ends up relocating the market, in

[3]Macpherson describes this model of selfhood as follows: "Whatever the degree of state action, the possessive market model permits individuals who want more delights than they have, to seek to convert the natural powers of other men to their use. They do so through the market, in which everyone is necessarily involved. Since the market is continually competitive, those who would be content with the level of satisfactions they have are compelled to fresh exertions by every attempt of the others to increase theirs. Those who would be content with the level they have cannot keep it without seeking more power, that is, without seeking to transfer more powers of others to themselves, to compensate for the increasing amount that the competitive efforts of others are transferring from them" (*The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962], pp. 58–59). The selves in "The Birth-mark," I shall argue, function according to the paradigm provided by Macpherson.

all of its uncontrollability, potency, and now in its invisibility, within himself.[4] Let us then begin to analyze the complex relations between allegory, the market, and the body, the defining nexus of what I take to be "the economics of allegory."[5]

We first encounter Aylmer departing from one physical space and entering another: he is leaving his laboratory for the charms of a domestic life with Georgiana. In order to accomplish this transition, he has "cleared his fine countenance from the furnace-smoke [and] washed the stain of acids from his fingers" (p. 36). Offering himself as a blank slate to Georgiana, however, does not guarantee that she will respond in kind, and in fact he finds upon Georgiana's countenance precisely those stains (in the shape of fingers that go into forming the hand of the birthmark) that he had washed from his own body. He cleanses himself of the marks of his laboratory only to resituate them onto the body of Georgiana. Not only are their physical traits transferrable (and I shall later point out that this transference goes from Georgiana to Aylmer as well as the other way around), but the narrator also informs us that Aylmer had devoted himself "too unreservedly to scientific studies, ever to be weaned from them by any second passion," so

[4]My analysis of the market and hysteria in "The Birth-mark" is indebted to Michaels's reading of Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism: American Literature at the Turn of the Century* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), esp. pp. 23–26, where he develops the following argument: "Perhaps we should regard hysteria as a disease not of women or even of doctors but of the middle-class market to which doctors and women (especially women writers), manufacturers and railway officials all belonged" (p. 25).

[5]"The Celestial Railroad" is, of course, a crucial text in Hawthorne's career as allegorist. Although this tale would seem to be an obvious rewriting of Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678), I believe that "The Celestial Railroad" marks the origin of Hawthorne's radical experimentation with allegory. Whereas character in Bunyan can be determined by the character's name, the protagonist of Hawthorne's tale, Mr. Smooth-it-away, cements the relation between his name and character at the very moment that his words and actions undo the stability between name and character. In smoothing problems away, Mr. Smooth-it-away introduces a gap into the relation between what something is called and what that something is. This gap becomes the site upon which Hawthorne develops an economics of allegory.

that "his love for his young wife . . . could only be by intertwining itself with his love of science" (pp. 36–37). From the start, then, Georgiana and Aylmer's marital future seems a far cry from the separation of spheres, in which women had authority over the private home while men dominated the public world, that represented the ideal for many white, middle-class families of the nineteenth century.[6]

Georgiana's body, and more specifically the birthmark, marks the site where the promises of the laboratory and the home converge. But the laboratory, we later learn, has been none too kind to Aylmer, whose scientific experiments up until this point "were almost invariably failures, if compared with the ideal at which he aimed" (p. 49). The birthmark presents Aylmer with a chance both to right these professional wrongs and, in doing so, to establish Georgiana as the "perfection" of hearth and home "where he would fain have worshipped" (p. 39). In becoming the perfect wife, however, Georgiana must first endure the ordeals that wait for her in the laboratory. The fact that she faints upon being helped over "the threshold of the laboratory" (p. 43) calls attention to the radical nature of her transition from the domestic space to Aylmer's laboratory. Having transgressed the boundaries between the home and laboratory, Georgiana awakens only to find that this separation has been reproduced once again within the context of the laboratory, only this time Aylmer's magical arts have constructed the domestic space: "Aylmer had converted those smoky, dingy, sombre rooms, where he had spent his brightest years in recondite pursuits, into a series of beautiful apartments, not unfit to be the secluded abode of a lovely woman" (p. 44). Georgiana's new abode represents Aylmer's domestic utopia, a fantasy of invisibility and disembodiment that is manifested (or hidden) in the "rich and ponderous folds" of the curtains that conceal

[6]The classic formulation of the doctrine of separate spheres can be found in Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780–1835* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1977). For recent challenges to Cott, see Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1984); and Mary P. Ryan, *Women in Public: Between Banners and Ballots, 1825–1880* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1990).

"all angles and straight lines" as well as those "airy figures, absolutely bodiless ideas, and forms of unsubstantial beauty" that "came and danced before her, imprinting their momentary footsteps on beams of light" (p. 44). Because Georgiana's seclusion is constituted by the very thing that it pretends to exclude (that is, Aylmer's scientific experiments), it should come as no surprise when the boundaries between her new abode and Aylmer's laboratory fail to remain separate yet again. This next spatial violation occurs when Georgiana, forgetting to inform Aylmer about "a sensation in the fatal birth-mark, not painful, but which induced a restlessness throughout her system," intrudes, "for the first time, into the laboratory" (p. 50).

Georgiana's transgressive entrance into Aylmer's workplace is accompanied by a transference of physical properties between wife and husband, as Aylmer "first reddened, then grew paler than ever, on beholding Georgiana" (p. 51). Her initial view of his laboratory has the same effect on Aylmer's physical system that his "gaze" had on hers, which was "to change the roses of her cheek into a deathlike paleness" (p. 39). The geographical restlessness that makes Georgiana unable to remain in her own space reproduces itself in the relation between the bodies of Georgiana and Aylmer. In trying to erase Georgiana's birthmark, Aylmer merely manages to locate its qualities elsewhere, and, as often as not, upon his own body. Another example of this corporeal exchange occurs in this same scene when Aylmer violently reacts to what seems to him Georgiana's Pandora-like curiosity about his workspace. When he first discovers her presence, "he rushed towards her, and seized her arm with a grip that left the print of his fingers upon it" (p. 51). This passage suggests that as Aylmer's desire to erase Georgiana's fingerlike birthmark becomes more and more compulsive, he cannot help but inscribe even more fingers upon Georgiana's body and his own, such as when he tells Georgiana that her "Crimson Hand" had "taken a pretty firm hold of [his] fancy" (pp. 39–40). The inescapability of fingers and hands is also made manifest in a dialogue between him and Georgiana where Aylmer solemnly discusses the concoctions in his laboratory,

one being the Elixir of Life, which "could apportion the lifetime of any mortal at whom you might point your finger," and another being a "powerful cosmetic" that, according to Aylmer, can wash away freckles "as easily as the hands are cleansed" (p. 47). We have seen, though, from the opening passages of the story when Aylmer washes "the stain of acids from his fingers" (p. 36), that seemingly erased stains end up manifesting themselves on the body of another.

What Aylmer observes in Georgiana's birthmark is the thematic of circulation. This thematic, we might recall, governs the discourse of identity-formation in antebellum America. In an 1838 address entitled "Self-Culture" William Ellery Channing observed: "we are able to discern not only what we already are, but what we may become, to see in ourselves germs and promises of a growth to which no bounds can be set, to dart beyond what we have actually gained to the idea of perfection as the end of our being." The boundlessness and the never-ending task of self-improvement is recapitulated by Henry Ward Beecher, who claims, "every product of the earth has a susceptibility of improvement."[7] These descriptions suggest that the self is constituted within a perpetual state of circulation, leading, of course, toward the end of self-improvement. In the name of improved selves, Aylmer and Georgiana enact their own version of this circulatory system only to reveal that one person's immobility becomes the condition for another person's unlimited circulation and capacity for self-improvement. Selves, here, function according to a model of territoriality in which the construction, transgression, and possession of physical space becomes the way in which characters as well as persons constitute themselves as individual selves. Aylmer's attempts to control the spatial movements in the laboratory, and the movements of Georgiana in particular, thus exemplify a self that exists by functioning simultaneously as an object that must defend itself from being possessed by others and as a subject that can only possess itself both in its attempts to possess others and by

[7]Channing, "Self-Culture," in *The Works of William Ellery Channing* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1970; originally published 1882), p. 14; and Beecher, *Lectures to Young Men on Various Important Subjects* (Boston: Jewett, 1853; originally published 1844), p. 26.

a continual repossession of itself. This territorial logic informs the spatial movements of "The Birth-mark," where worlds (in particular Aylmer's) are upset by his entrance into the domestic and her (transgressive) intervention into the laboratory. As I have suggested, the problematic effect of these incursions is not confined to the spatial realm alone, but has significant corporeal ramifications as well. It would seem that Aylmer seeks to bring this circulatory system to a conclusion by ridding Georgiana (and himself) of the mark of this economy—the birthmark. The birthmark, after all, instantiates this circulatory economy in all of its changeability, its lack of intentionality, and its horrifying visibility. Aylmer's actions make increasingly clear that it is not the circulatory system as a whole that he wishes to end but rather Georgiana's powerful and problematic participation in it.

There is, however, one character whose lack of participation in this circulatory scenario requires some explanation—Aminadab, the "under-worker" in Aylmer's laboratory. This character, "with his vast strength, his shaggy hair, his smoky aspect, and the indescribable earthiness that incrusted him" (p. 43), introduces the category of class into the circulatory system of the story, which until this point I have been analyzing primarily in terms of gender relations. Aminadab makes his first appearance in the story when Georgiana enters the magically domesticated space of the laboratory and loses consciousness. Requiring Aminadab's help, Aylmer calls out and his assistant immediately issues from "an inner apartment" (p. 43). Aminadab's circulations are limited—in fact this is the only time that he leaves the laboratory proper—and controlled by Aylmer. We soon learn that Aylmer relies upon Aminadab's "great mechanical readiness" and his ability to execute properly the "practical details" of an experiment, while at the same time Aminadab "seemed to represent man's physical nature" (p. 43) and, in the final paragraph of the story, is likened to "the gross Fatality of Earth" (p. 56). Aminadab's characterological flexibility is most evident when Aylmer refers to him as both "thou human machine" and "thou man of clay" (p. 51). The fact that Aminadab can resemble a human machine just as easily as a clod of earth seems less

significant than the fact that he is barely a character at all. Also making this point quite clearly is Georgiana's reaction to Aminadab, or rather her lack of one. When she enters Aylmer's inner sanctum where he has been concocting the liquid that he hopes will cure her of her birthmark, "the first thing that struck her eye was the furnace, that hot and feverish worker" (p. 50). Indeed, as her gaze turns to Aylmer, she never does focus on Aminadab, the worker, who "was grimed with the vapors of the furnace" (p. 43). Georgiana never sees Aminadab not only because he is neither human nor machine, but because he is invisible. This invisibility keeps Aylmer's scientific experiments running smoothly (even if they all result in failure). The relation Aylmer has cultivated with Aminadab is, I think, a model for the relation Aylmer would like to have with his wife. Aminadab represents an ideal of immobility, stability, and submissiveness. Georgiana's future invisibility will ensure the successful operation of the domestic space that Aylmer has achieved via Aminadab in the workplace. When Aylmer seeks to construct his gender relations along the same lines as his class relations with Aminadab, Georgiana proves far more difficult to manage than the worker. Still, it is not exactly Georgiana who is resistant to Aylmer's scientific manipulations, but rather her birthmark.

The comings and goings of Georgiana's birthmark epitomize the spatial and physical circulations of the story and locate them upon (and within) her female body. The birthmark not only becomes the occasion for the breakdown between the domestic realm and the laboratory, but also collapses the private and public domains; that is, the birthmark makes it impossible for Georgiana's private emotions ever to be anything but signs for public (that is, Aylmer's) consumption. Georgiana is one incessant circulatory system. This fact is made evident by her constant blushing, paling, and crying. The narrator's first description of the birthmark calls attention to the inextricable relation between Georgiana's psychic and physical instability:

> In the usual state of her complexion,—a healthy, though delicate bloom,—the mark wore a tint of deeper crimson, which imper-

> fectly defined its shape amid the surrounding rosiness. When she blushed, it gradually became more indistinct, and finally vanished amid the triumphant rush of blood, that bathed the whole cheek with its brilliant glow. But, if any shifting emotion caused her to turn pale, there was the mark again, a crimson stain upon the snow, in what Aylmer sometimes deemed an almost fearful distinctness. (pp. 37–38)

The birthmark foregrounds the physical and emotional fluctuations that should remain invisible, in particular the nomadic wanderings of her blood supply.[8] And yet it is those very circulations, especially Georgiana's blushing, that make the birthmark invisible. If circulation is the problem (the birthmark marks the circulation of blood in Georgiana's body), it is also the solution. The problem, after all, exists and intensifies when Georgiana's blood is not circulating properly; to take her out of circulation, which is what Aylmer proposes to do by removing the birthmark, will only make things worse—as the conclusion of the story tragically evinces. It seems clear that Aylmer's difficulty with Georgiana's birthmark has less to do with the fact of its presence than with its oscillating presence and absence, which denotes the emotional and physical fluctuations that Aylmer would rather not see, or to put it more precisely, that he would prefer to control. Thus, in wishing to erase the sign(s) of Georgiana's circulatory economy, Aylmer does not necessarily want to do away with it—only her participation in it. Aylmer himself makes this point when he confesses to Georgiana, "I have already administered agents

[8]Georgiana's blood spills onto the narrative in a variety of ways, the most important being the fact that the birthmark is often referred to as "the Crimson Hand" (pp. 39, 42, 51) and even once as "the Bloody Hand" (p. 38). It is very clear that Aylmer's aversion to Georgiana's birthmark stems from his anxiety about sexuality, especially since their problems begin "very soon after their marriage, [as] Aylmer sat gazing at his wife, with a trouble in his countenance that grew stronger" (p. 37). This discussion of "The Birth-mark" seeks to link the highly visible and public circulations of Georgiana's sexuality with a system of economic circulation committed to invisibility and private property. For discussions of Hawthorne and feminism, see Nina Baym, "Thwarted Nature: Nathaniel Hawthorne as Feminist," in *American Novelists Revisited: Essays in Feminist Criticism,* ed. Fritz Fleischmann (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982); Gillian Brown, *Domestic Individualism: Imagining Self in Nineteenth-Century America* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990); and Lauren Berlant's *The Anatomy of National Fantasy: Hawthorne, Utopia, and Everyday Life* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991), which focuses almost exclusively on *The Scarlet Letter.*

powerful enough to do aught except to change your entire physical system" (pp. 51–52). But what he does not realize is that the sign and the economy, the birthmark and the circulatory system to which it refers, go hand in hand.

The birthmark seems to act as a transparent conduit between Georgiana's psychic and physical states, and as such it installs a signifying system where private and public, signs and referents, bodies and minds are unmediated. Aylmer, in stark contrast, adheres to an alternative system of signification based on disjunction or representation. This, I take it, is the point of those lengthy passages detailing Aylmer's many attempts to pacify Georgiana, all of which exemplify the principle of hermeneutic disjunction. In preparing his "smoky, dingy, sombre rooms" for Georgiana's occupancy, for instance, Aylmer creates an atmosphere of "enchantment" and "magic" (p. 44) through a series of optical illusions that make "a picture, an image, or a shadow, so much more attractive than the original" (p. 45). Entertaining her with dioramas, daguerreotypes, and Rappaccini-like floral experiments, all of which are "mortifying failures" (p. 46), Aylmer celebrates the principle of representational disjunction, and it is this principle that he wishes to inscribe upon Georgiana's body.

But it is already there. Having suggested that Georgiana and Aylmer present us with two versions of signification, the first an unmediated form of circulation and the other a highly mediated one, I now want to argue that this opposition does not in fact adequately account for Aylmer's anxiety about the birthmark, and furthermore that these representational systems locate themselves within a specific economic framework that permits us to understand what is at stake, economically speaking, in Aylmer's desire to remove the birthmark. If we return to the above quotation in which the colorations of Georgiana's birthmark are adumbrated, it becomes clear that although the birthmark accurately measures the alterations of her emotions, it does not guarantee whether those emotions will make her turn pale, thereby bringing into relief the crimson tint of the birthmark, or will cause her to blush, thus concealing what Aylmer perceives as "the visible mark of earthly imperfection" (p. 37). In a related passage, the narra-

tor suggests that Aylmer's revulsion toward the birthmark originates as much in its problematic instability as in its physical fact, which was "now vaguely portrayed, now lost, now stealing forth again, and glimmering to-and-fro with every pulse of emotion that throbbed within her heart" (p. 38). Aylmer's hermeneutic response to the birthmark reproduces the instability that, for him, characterizes the very problem posed by it. In this same passage, for example, he comes up with three different, albeit related, readings of the birthmark. Aylmer first identifies it as "the fatal flaw of humanity" (p. 38), a description that suffices for a short while until the birthmark more correctly expresses "the ineludible gripe, in which mortality clutches the highest and purest of earthly mould," only to become "the symbol of his wife's liability to sin, sorrow, decay, and death" (p. 39). The birthmark guarantees the presence of meaning for Aylmer, but precisely what that meaning is remains in flux.[9]

Thus, as unmediated as the relation between Georgiana's psychic and physical states may seem at first glance, the changes in the birthmark end up inscribing precisely that kind of hermeneutic disjunction that had seemed most obviously represented by Aylmer's optical illusions. The question of mediation brings us, I think, to the issue of the birthmark's shape. Why a hand? We can begin to answer this question by looking at the passage in which Georgiana reads the records of Aylmer's scientific experiments:

> But, to Georgiana, the most engrossing volume was a large folio from her husband's own *hand*. . . . He *handled* physical details, as if there were nothing beyond them. . . . In his *grasp*, the veriest clod of earth assumed a soul. . . . His brightest diamonds were the merest pebbles, and felt to be so by himself, in comparison with

[9]Michaels raises some of the same issues in "Romance and Real Estate," particularly in his discussion of Holgrave's daguerreotype of Judge Pyncheon: "the daguerreotype always sees through to the fixed truth behind the fluctuating movements of the 'public character' " (p. 167). "The Birth-Mark" also has a daguerreotype scene that would seem to concur with Michaels's reading. The results of Aylmer's daguerreotype are predictable, "the features of the portrait [were] blurred and indefinable; while the minute figure of a hand appeared where the cheek should have been" (p. 45). As in *The House of the Seven Gables,* here the daguerreotype manages to expose the truth of the birthmark, but far from being a fixed one, its truth is the fact of its continual fluctuations.

> the inestimable gems which lay hidden beyond his *reach.* The volume, rich with achievements that had won renown for its author, was yet as melancholy a record as ever mortal had *penned.*
>
> (pp. 48–49; emphasis added)

I have edited this lengthy passage in order to highlight the ubiquitous allusions to hands. Furthermore, in this description of Aylmer the scientist we get our first glimpse of Aylmer the author. In having not only her own two hands but a "mimic hand" as well, Georgiana wears a visible sign that someone—surely not herself, most emphatically not Aylmer, and most likely nature, "our great creative Mother" (p. 42)—has authored her first. Thus, the mimic hand painfully calls attention to the failures of Aylmer's "mortal hand" (p. 49). Mediating all of these hands, of course, is the hand of Hawthorne, which, I think, has often been mistaken for Aylmer's hand. Compelling arguments have been made based on similarities between Aylmer's science and Hawthorne's artistry only to establish the difference between them or to rescue the author from Aylmer's fate by pointing to his critical attitude toward Aylmer's violent, obsessive nature.[10] But the case is more complicated that that. Aylmer's desire to erase the "mimic hand" on Georgiana's cheek, which is the product of both "creative Mother" *and* creative father (or Hawthorne, the one engaged in an act of mimesis), seems to be a direct assault on Hawthorne's mediating role as author. The attempt to make Georgiana's hand invisible, in other words, is an attempt to wipe out not only the signs of Georgiana's circulations but the signs of Hawthorne's own labor in the writing of the text. His identity as author is deeply implicated in the visibility of the birthmark. The territorial battle being waged via the birthmark between Aylmer and Georgiana is also being fought between Aylmer and Hawthorne. Aylmer will not do to Hawthorne what he did to Aminadab and Georgiana. For Hawthorne, too, the birthmark becomes an object to be possessed, and, as such, his only chance for pos-

[10]Bell's *The Development of the American Romance* and John Limon's *The Place of Fiction in the Time of Science: A Disciplinary History of American Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1990) most persuasively articulate this position.

session exists within the framework of a competitive market economy from which he might rather be exempt. Paradoxically, Hawthorne can only save the signs of his labor by participating in an economic structure whose primary feature seems to be a desire to erase those signs.

Erasing the visible signs of labor became a cultural project in nineteenth-century America, I think, especially in light of radical transformations occurring in the workplace. We need only turn to the controversy surrounding the Lowell Mills—in which some female workers specifically complained about the negative effects of work on their bodies, others celebrated the salubrious environment of the mills, and visitors to the mills left with diametrically opposed opinions on the subject—in order to realize that the bodies of the female workers became a battleground upon which was waged a conflict about ownership and agency. Did women workers agree to disown themselves once they entered "the Counting-room, and receive[d] therefrom a Regulation paper, containing the rules by which she must be governed while in their employ"?[11] And if so, what aspect of themselves as agents had they consented to dispossess? In one of the Factory Tracts of 1845, a series of articles written by operatives in the Lowell Mills, a fictional "Julianna" addresses some of these issues and predicts a rather horrible future for America's labor force if the factory system continues unchanged: "What but ignorance, misery, and *premature decay* of both *body* and *intellect?* Our country will be but one great hospital filled with worn out operatives and colored slaves!" (Foner, p. 134). "Julianna" points to the transformation of both body and mind experienced by the female operatives and, most damagingly, conjoins it with slavery. This linkage appeared in many indictments (from the working-class to pro-slavery ethusiasts) of the northern factory system, and one need only look in the pages of *The Voice of Industry* to find statements such as the following: "They [those who believe in the inevitability of a poverty-stricken class of workers] hate,

[11]Quoted in Philip S. Foner, ed., *The Factory Girls: A Collection of Writings on Life and Struggles in the New England Factories of the 1840s by the Factory Girls Themselves, and the Story, in Their Own Words, of the First Trade Unions of Women Workers in the United States* (Urbana and Chicago: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1977), p. 135.

perhaps, black slavery, but must have forsooth a class of white slaves."[12] The conjunction of slaves and workers also situates the issue of ownership in terms of one's own body. In stark contrast to "Julianna's" negative evaluation of factory life at Lowell, *The Lowell Offering* printed a series of articles and short stories written by the workers themselves, all of whom attested to the healthy life they lead. In an 1842 editorial entitled "Health" the writer observes:

> A favorable circumstance in connection with factory labor is its regularity; rising, sleeping, and eating, at the same hours on each successive day. . . . The appearance of the girls is generally that of health and cheerfulness; but yet there is sickeness here, and far more than there need be. In many cases where health is lost the loser is greatly to blame, and yet it is spoken of as a necessary result of factory labor. The desire to lay upon others the blame of our own faults is "as old as Adam," and we see examples of it almost every day. There are thousands of girls in Lowell at that age when their constitutions are maturing, where girls are always most careless.[13]

If one turns to the "professional" opinions to clarify what appear to be the mutually exclusive statements of workers at Lowell, the contradictions simply reappear. On the one hand we have Dr. Elisha Bartlett's *A Vindication of the Character and Condition of the Females Employed in the Lowell Mills,* originally written in 1839, which claims that "*The manufacturing population of this city is the healthiest portion of the population*" because "their labor is sufficiently active and sufficiently light to avoid the evils arising from the two extremes of indolence and over-exertion."[14] Given Lowell's clean bill of health, what do we then make of an anonymous pamphlet that appeared only two years later entitled *Corporations and Operatives,* which challenges all of Bartlett's observations? "They [the owners of the mills] regard them, but as mere parts of the machinery,

[12]*The Voice of Industry,* 28 August 1845.

[13]*The Lowell Offering,* Series II, vol. 3, 1842–43 (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Reprint, 1970).

[14]*A Vindication of the Character and Condition of the Females Employed in the Lowell Mills Against the Charges Contained in the Boston Times, and the Boston Quarterly Review* (New York: Arno Press, 1974; originally published in the Lowell *Courier,* July 1839), p. 13.

with which they accumulate money,—and their greatest skill is used to keep that part of the machines, which is made of human *flesh, and blood, and bones,* in operation, the same number of hours, and at the same speed, as those parts, which are made of *iron and wood.*"[15] Add to these the observations of Reverend William Scoresby in *American Factories and their Female Operatives,* and the situation seems impossible to figure out: "after a year or two they have to procure shoes of a size or two larger than before they came" and "the right hand, which is used in stopping and starting the loom, becomes larger than the left."[16] We cannot come to any conclusion from these documents about the "real" understanding of the effects of the factory system upon the health of the Lowell operatives. This does not mean, however, that we cannot reach any conclusions whatsoever. Indeed, something becomes obvious in this debate about Lowell: the Lowell community, whether its workers, its doctors, or its visitors, was deeply committed to understanding the problem posed by the relation between factories and the health of the workers and articulating their own version of that relation. Furthermore, this debate about Lowell also suggests that anxieties about mechanization in the workplace grounded themselves in questions about the body. If one could not see the signs of factory labor (that is, if the operatives wrote bucolic sketches for *The Lowell Offering* and maintained their healthful vigor), then this new kind of labor was innocent of the charges leveled against it. If, however, the signs of factory labor were visible (that is, if bodies were decaying or changing in grotesque ways, as suggested by "Julianna" and Scoresby), then this new kind of labor was guilty as charged. And lastly, at the very moment that the ideological foundations of the work ethic were being called into question, the best guarantee of a salutary work ethic was the invisibility of work itself. The

[15]Anon., *Corporations and Operatives: Being an Exposition of the Condition: Factory Operatives, and a Review of the "Vindication," by Elisha Bartlett, M.D.* (Lowell: Samuel J. Varney, 1843; originally published 1841), p. 16.

[16]*American Factories and their Female Operatives; with an Appeal on Behalf of the British Factory Population and Suggestions for the Improvement of their Condition* (Boston: Ticknor, 1845), p. 64.

body, then, either became a marked text upon which was written the visible signs of a labor system gone amok or a blank page whose very invisibility was a kind of sign too, but one that referred to the salvific version of labor.

To conclude that the signs needed erasure meant to admit that new kinds of labor were, at the very least, potentially damaging both to workers and the work ethic. If so, a new space was required to heal these wounds, and this was the space of leisure, the space occupied by literature. Historian Daniel T. Rodgers notes that in a society so committed to the ethical importance of labor, "the hardest wrench of values was to admit that work under modern industrial conditions was inherently harmful, its 'damage' to be undone only by leisure."[17] But it is important to note that these industrial conditions permeated the space of leisure as well; that is, the space of leisure not only had to provide a refuge from the damages done by work, but if the ideology of the work ethic could no longer be supported in the workplace because of the changes in work, leisure also had the additional task of disseminating the work ethic. Thus, at the same time that industrialized labor changed the physical contours of the workplace, leisure time took on an increasingly significant function in the maintenance of the work ethic. The paradox, of course, as Rodgers notes (p. 93), was that the failure of the work ethic was proportionally related to the significance of leisure.

The ideological aesthetic that consistently acknowledged and denied the hand(s) of labor is nowhere more apparent than in the general discussions of literature and the numerous literary reviews of the period that often valorized those texts that most successfully camouflaged the labor that went into their making. In the June 1855 issue of the *Tribune* one reviewer praised the writing style of popular novelist Charles Reade because it successfully avoided "the conventionalities of fictious writing, and often ha[d] a salient freshness which [went] far to account for their attractions, without referring to

[17] *The Work Ethic in Industrial America, 1850–1920* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974), p. 93.

any skill in construction of plot, or the delineation of character."[18] No one denied the fact that writing fiction was hard work, but nineteenth-century taste was predicated on the absence of hard work. This aesthetic was disseminated through what I shall call the discourse of literary labor—a labor that proved especially problematic for nineteenth-century readers and a labor that was often linked to the presence of allegory.

The discourse of literary labor applies the ideology of the work ethic to a fictional text, thereby transgressing the boundaries between aesthetics and work, between leisure and labor. One particularly powerful example of this discourse appeared in an unsigned 1850 *Post* review of *White-Jacket.* This reviewer, whom we know to be Charles Gordon Greene, raises the issue of Melville's competence to discuss the complexities of naval discipline and the Articles of War and concludes that Melville was not, in fact, competent to do so. Of particular interest, however, is the way in which he formulates his objection: "The mind as well as the body is subject to the 'Division of Labor,' and, in most cases, those gifts and acquirements which enable one to produce a good romance unfit him for the calm, comprehensive and practical consideration of questions of jurisprudence or policy."[19] The division of labor invoked by Greene speaks rather directly to the point of *White-Jacket* because the *Neversink,* like the *Pequod,* reproduced many of the same divisions of labor that existed on shore. More importantly, Greene's reference suggests that the divisions of labor pertaining to the body ought to pertain to the mind as well—the authorial mind of Melville. In Greene's review, then, Melville's literary labor would undergo precisely the kind of subdivision experienced by other laborers whose work was being similarly subdivided.

Melville figures this subdivision of labor in one of the most extraordinary scenes in *White-Jacket*—the operation conducted by one of the *Neversink*'s most "professional" crew-

[18]Quoted in Nina Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers: Responses to Fiction in Antebellum America* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1984), p. 135.

[19]Quoted in *Melville: The Critical Heritage,* ed. Watson G. Branch (London: Routledge & Kegal Paul, 1974), p. 234.

members, Cadwallader Cuticle, M.D.[20] The radical instability of this new kind of (subdivided) work is, I think, nowhere more pointedly, ghoulishly, and comically figured than with this allegorical character. Cuticle exemplifies the work ethic in all of its efficiency and horror. He incarnates the allegorical character's problematic relation to work. His utter commitment to his "eminent vocation" (p. 251), a vocation of amputation that he literally embodies and seeks to embody in others, is what leads him to commit such gruesome acts of violence. In one of the longest chapters of the book the Surgeon Cuticle, who "can drop a leg in one minute and ten seconds" (p. 257), amputates the leg of a sailor who, though forbidden to leave the ship, had attempted to escape and was shot. Instead of simply removing the piece of artillery, Cuticle insists that "amputation [is] the only resource" (p. 253). Before commencing the ultimately fatal operation, Cuticle "snatched off his wig, placing it on the gun-deck capstan; then took out his set of false teeth, and placed it by the side of the wig; and, lastly, putting his forefinger to the inner angle of his blind eye, spirted out the glass optic with professional dexterity, and deposited that, also, next to the wig and false teeth" (p. 258). Once Cuticle divests himself "of nearly all inorganic appurtenances" (p. 258), his lust for the organic emerges. The narrator emphasizes Cuticle's enjoyment of "an unusually beautiful" (p. 261) amputation that did not need to occur except for the fact that he wanted to operate upon a "splendid subject" (p. 262). After amputating his helpless patient's leg, Cuticle, with "bloody" and "ensanguined" hands, passionately lectures his fellow surgeons on the procedure they have just witnessed. In the operating room Cuticle both takes back the properties of the natural body, in the form of blood, and inflicts his own state of inorganicism upon his patient's body; that is, he carves up bodies in order to replace organic body parts with prosthetic ones. His lust for work turns out to be a zest for death.

[20]Melville, *White-Jacket; or, The World in a Man-of-War,* ed. Harrison Hayford, Hershel Parker, and G. Thomas Tanselle, vol. 5 of *The Writings of Herman Melville* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern Univ. Press and The Newberry Library, 1970; originally published 1850), p. 251.

Cuticle illustrates the allegorical character's relation to work, and the work ethic's particularly problematic configuration of agency. Cuticle's work is both the way for Cuticle to possess agency and the means by which he dispossesses the agency of others. Whereas the "possessive individualism" of the market, to use Macpherson's phrase, produces a version of agency in which one's own agency depends upon the territorial appropriation of another's, the work ethic formulates agency as a matter of individual pursuit that is at once constituted within but removed from the contingencies of the marketplace. The work ethic, it would seem, fully cooperates with the possessive individualism of the market. Although the agency of allegorical characters is located within the complexities of the market, more often than not they are in the position of either possessing agency or not possessing it at all, or, as the case of Cuticle (and Aylmer) suggests, they are most lacking agency at the very moment that they are most possessing it. Although allegorical agents enact a kind of mobility propounded by both the work ethic and the market, their mobility is parodic because they can occupy really only three positions in the network of power—either they have a lot of it or they do not have any at all, or both. Thus, their mobility is also a kind of immobility.

If Cuticle appeared in a Hawthorne story, we might make a convincing argument for him as the artist-figure with whom Hawthorne identified and from whom he wished to distance himself. A slightly different conclusion obtains when we consider Melville's relation to Cuticle, especially in light of Melville's infamous relation to his readership.[21] Cuticle, as an author-figure, displaces the violence that has been done to him through violent acts against others. (The) Cuticle is what remains when the hands and fingers, the metonymies of labor, have been erased. Cuticle's violence dramatizes a last-ditch effort to keep visible the signs of labor, no matter how unsavory they may be. Greene's call for the division of labor, itself a violent amputation of the author's self, occasions the

[21] William Charvat's *The Profession of Authorship in America, 1800–1870,* ed. Matthew J. Bruccoli (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1968) is the definitive study of Melville's vexed relation to his audience.

acts of violence committed by the authorlike Cuticle. As an example of authorial agency gone berserk, the violence and power of Cuticle's expression of agency derives from his own experience of self-violation and his experience of violating others. In occupying these seemingly mutually exclusive positions at one and the same time, Cuticle illustrates the divided subjectivity of the allegorical agent who circulates within the economy of power made available by the market and reinscribes that economy in his doctor/patient relations. The connection between literary reviews and potential amputation even occurs in an early chapter of *White-Jacket,* in which the narrator praises the literary sensibility of the noble Captain Jack Chase, who "was not ill qualified to play the true part of a *Quarterly Review;*—which, is to give quarter at last, however severe the critique" (p. 41). Should Jack Chase have to quarter someone in a literary review, his reasons, unlike Charles Greene's, would be sensible and honorable.

The discourse of literary labor might best be described as advice literature for authors in training—those literary reviews and essays that claimed to represent the taste of middle-class antebellum readers. Henry Ward Beecher provides an account of the function of literature in his essay "Reading": reading permits one to see the world "so refashioned that we no longer think where we are, or what we are, but seem to ourselves carried back scores of years, and walking up and down again the ways of childhood."[22] The geographical, temporal, and historical displacement that should occur when we read, according to Beecher, is reiterated in an 1850 *Harper's* article depicting the ideal style of writing that would promote the ideal experience of reading: "[the author] is the invisible agent that moves the magic machinery by which you are transported into a region of illusory enchantments. . . . The moment you perceive the finger of a man the fond deception vanishes."[23] The pleasure of reading depends upon the fiction of an agency that invisibly controls the magic machinery of the text. Displeasure comes about when the reader detects the presence of agency, an agency that is

[22]"Reading," in *Eyes and Ears* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1862), p. 187.
[23]Quoted in Baym, *Novels, Readers, and Reviewers,* p. 149.

metonymically figured as the author's finger, Cuticle's finger, and the hand-shaped birthmark. The finger in Beecher's text is a metonymy on two levels. Not only does it metonymically represent the author as laborer, but it also metonymically represents the author's actual labor in that the finger is the part of the author's body that holds the pen that transforms thoughts into language. In describing the relation between authorship and labor, then, Beecher's review fragments both the author's body and the authorial labor of writing itself.

The discourse of literary labor often acknowledged the author's labor, whether metonymically in the *Harper's* article or more directly in the case of Beecher, who claims that "the masterpieces of antiquity, as well in literature as in art, are known to have received their extreme finish from an almost incredible continuance of labor upon them," only to urge its erasure. (*Lectures,* p. 33). The work ethic was alive and well in the production of literature even though the traces of labor (and laborer) were better left out of the picture (or the text). Horace Bushnell, who along with Emerson was widely recognized as one of America's most important religious thinkers and philosophers of language, articulates a variant of this position (he adds the weight of religious belief to the discourse) in his 1848 oration "Work and Play": "the writer himself is hidden and can not even suggest his existence. Hence egotism, which also is a form of work, the dullest, most insipid, form of work, least inspiring of all kinds of endeavor, is nowhere allowed to obtrude itself."[24] By excising the traces of "labor," "historic results," and the writer's existence, the text "becomes to the cultivated reader a spring of the intensest and most captivating spiritual incitement" (p. 22). The pleasure of this text depended upon the erasure of work and, more radically, of agency.[25] Thus it was not un-

[24]Bushnell, *Work and Play; or Literary Varieties* (New York: Scribner's, 1864), p. 22.

[25]Bushnell's theory of literature and culture judges the moral and aesthetic value of a text according to its separation from the world of labor and material life. This attitude toward cultural production exemplifies what Herbert Marcuse has defined

usual to see the following kind of praise in literary reviews: "Mr. Bryant's style in these letters is an admirable model of descriptive prose. Without any appearance of labor, it is finished with an exquisite grace."[26] In contrast to this ideal of invisible labor, the appearance of authorial labor often made the reviewer quite strident, as is evident in this 1850 *Harper's* review: "The scene, which is frequently shifted without sufficient regard to the locomotive faculties of the reader, betrays occasional inaccuracies and anachronisms, showing the hand of a writer who has not gained a perfect mastery of his materials. . . . recourse is had to an awkward and improbable plot, many of the details of which are, in a high degree, unnatural, and often grossly revolting."[27] The figure of the author's hand provided critics with a short-handed way of criticizing a text.

The situation seems paradoxical. On the one hand we find a culture representing and celebrating the valiant struggle to attain virtue through the work ethic, while on the other hand we find that same culture disdaining a literary text because it represents its own labor. This paradox begins to make sense, however, once we realize that at the very moment when actual machinery gained visibility on a scale previously unknown in factories (like the textile mills of Fall River and Lowell) and reconfigured the modes (and means) of production, literary critics were advising authors to hide their own machinery. The discourse of literary labor marked the discomfort with this transformation; it defined literature as a self-contained sphere, invulnerable to the dilemmas being faced in the world of work. The problem, however, was that at the very moment that these critics wished to separate literature from

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as "the affirmative character of culture": "the ontological cleavage of ideal from material values tranquilizes idealism in all that regards the material processes of life. In idealism, a specific historical form of the division of labor and of social stratification takes on the eternal, metaphysical form of the relationship of necessity and beauty" (*Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* [Boston: Beacon, 1968], pp. 88–133). By positing an unbridgeable gap between the ideal and the material processes of life, then, the affirmative character of culture functions to represent as transcendent historical forms that are, in fact, historically determined.

[26] *Harper's*, 1 (June 1850), 140.

[27] *Harper's*, 1 (November 1850), 860.

labor, they themselves constructed a version of the relation of literature to labor that looked remarkably like the problematic relation that seemed to exist between the new machinery in the workplace and the laborers; that is, the invisibility of authorial agency and the metonymic fragmentation of the author's body that we have seen in the discourse of literary labor were frighteningly compatible with workers' anxieties about their lack of agency and the corporeal changes brought about by new kinds of labor. The discourse of literary labor thus collapsed the very distinction it meant to preserve.

Authorial labor had to remain invisible in order for literature to remain outside the fray. As the very idea of labor in antebellum America underwent a radical transformation, literary critics called upon authors to keep their labor to themselves. The literary labor that seemed to most fully illustrate this collapse of the work ethic was allegory, and in particular the allegorical representation of fictional character. The discomfort that often accompanied the presence of allegorical characters in fiction went beyond the confined boundaries of literary taste. We need only remember Poe's famous excoriation of allegory in his review of Bulwer-Lytton's *Night and Morning:* "Pure allegory is at all times an abomination."[28] Similarly, an 1852 *Harper's* review of Henry Cheever's *A Reel in the Bottle* warned, "Modern allegory is a dangerous species of composition."[29] Although critics often furnished their reviews with a variety of aesthetic reasons for allegory's unacceptability, their language makes clear that the aesthetic headache brought on by allegory had some rather painful cultural sources. Allegorical characters foregrounded many of the most difficult and challenging issues being faced by nineteenth-century Americans: the problematic status of agency, the reconstruction of the body, and the changing nature of work in a market economy; and that is why it was denounced.[30]

[28]*Graham's,* 18 (April 1841), 201.

[29]*Harper's,* 4 (April 1852), 709.

[30]The Coleridgean model of allegory suggests that if allegory caused the dis-ease, the symbol provided the cure. See *Lay Sermons* (London: E. Moxon, 1852). On Coleridge's influence in America, F. O. Matthiessen claims that "the most immediate

These economic concerns are foregrounded by the allegorical elements of "The Birth-mark," and I wish to conclude with a reading of the economics of the allegorical birthmark. Another reading of the birthmark that adds to the debate about the "Crimson Hand," the "spectral Hand," the "odious Hand," and the "Bloody Hand" (pp. 38–39), yet one more hand could be construed as my obsessive reproduction of Aylmer's fetishism. But if we look at the Invisible Hand of Adam Smith, which makes its appearance in the following passage, perhaps the most famous in *The Wealth of Nations,* Aylmer's actions take on a new meaning: "By preferring the support of domestic to that of foreign industry, he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention."[31] According to Smith, consequences often have little to do with one's intentions because one's self-interested intention "frequently promotes [the interest] of the society more effectually that when he really intends to promote it" (II, 28). This is clearly not the case in "The Birth-mark," where Aylmer's self-interested intentions bring about self-interested results that do everything to preserve "his own security" and do nothing to promote "the public good" (*Wealth,* II, 28). Have the goals of 1776, the year that saw the publication of *The Wealth of Nations* and the birth pangs of an

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force behind American transcendentalism was Coleridge" (*American Renaissance: Art and Expression in the Age of Emerson and Whitman* [New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1941], p. 6); and more recently, Leon Chai has argued, "We know of Emerson's reverence, attested to on numerous occasions throughout his journals and essays, for Coleridge as a critic and thinker. His homage to Coleridge summarizes what Emerson finds most praiseworthy in 'modern' literature, an embodiment of the essential qualities of the Transcendentalist vision itself" (*The Romantic Foundations of the American Renaissance* [Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1987], pp. 385–86). Jerome J. McGann also claims, "Coleridge's views were to enjoy a truly remarkable triumph in England and America for one hundred and fifty years, particularly in those *petit bourgeois* enclaves which Coleridge called 'the clerisy,' that body of culture-guardians whose center today is in the academies" (*The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation* [Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1983], p. 7).

[31] *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations,* ed. James E. Therold Rogers, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1880), II, 28.

American nation, been both forsaken by and made unavailable to America in the 1840s? If so, are we to read "The Birth-mark" as a nineteenth-century corrective to the misguided optimism of political economists like Smith who believed that self-interest and the public good were not mutually exclusive in a society that functioned according to a laissez-faire market economy? Tempting as this reading might be, Hawthorne's story seems less an indictment of a laissez-faire economy than of an economy that is not laissez-faire enough. The tension at the heart of "The Birth-mark" is this: Aylmer's desired end is the invisible hand of Smith's market economy, but the means he deploys in achieving it fly in the face of Smith's economic directives.

What Hawthorne thought of Smith or whether he even read *The Wealth of Nations* has unfortunately not been documented. Sacvan Bercovitch, however, has recently claimed that the brand of irony at work in Hawthorne's representations of the Puritan past is a "historiographical equivalent of laissez-faire," a "counterpart to Adam Smith's concept of the invisible hand."[32] In following Bercovitch's lead, I want to argue that the free market ideology at work in Smith's ideal of the invisible hand is, in part, what motivates Aylmer to erase the visible hand that is Georgiana's birthmark. But in living up to Smith's principles Aylmer uses all the wrong strategies: not only is his task deeply intentional, which is antithetical to the unintentionality that governs the marketplace in *The Wealth of Nations,* but Aylmer's active intervention into Georgiana's body is, to say the least, the furthest thing from a policy of laissez-faire. Aylmer's anti-market methods, in other words, will make it impossible for him to attain what he desires—the invisible hand and the subsequent power of the market—or else something will go awry in the attempt to fulfill his wishes.

[32] *The Office of "The Scarlet Letter"* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1991), p. 41. For a brilliant discussion of Smith's thought, see Jean-Christophe Agnew, *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theater in Anglo-American Thought, 1550–1750* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1986), esp. "The Spectacle of the Market," pp. 149–94. For a brief discussion of Smith's impact on American economic theory and the late-nineteenth-century novel, see Howard Horwitz, *By the Law of Nature: Form and Value in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1991).

My discussion of the circulations in "The Birth-mark" and Georgiana's body, in particular, has thus far focused on problematics of gender and signification raised by this state of instability. In moving to a discussion of the economic issues suggested by this thematic of circulation, it might be useful to consider another, somewhat lengthier passage from *The Wealth of Nations,* in which Smith figures the economic circulations of late-eighteenth-century Great Britain in blatantly physiological terms:

> In her present condition, Great Britain resembles one of those unwholesome bodies in which some of the vital parts are overgrown, and which, upon that account, are liable to many dangerous disorders scarce incident to those in which all the parts are more properly proportioned. A small stop in that great blood-vessel, which has been artificially swelled beyond its natural dimensions, and through which an unnatural proportion of the industry and commerce of the country has been forced to circulate, is very likely to bring on the most dangerous disorders upon the whole body politic. . . . The blood, of which the circulation is stopped in some of the smaller vessels, easily disgorges itself into the greater, without occasioning any dangerous disorder; but, when it is stopped in any of the greater vessels, convulsions, apoplexy, or death are the immediate and unavoidable consequences.
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> (II, 187)

According to this description Georgiana's birthmark could be registering a deeply disordered market. And this is indeed the case; not, however, because Georgiana's fluctuating blood supply manifests any disorder (her paling and blushing would be evidence of a healthy and mobile physiological state), but rather because Aylmer's inability to focus on anything other than Georgiana's birthmark brings about a state not unlike the one described by Smith, in which "convulsions, apoplexy" *and* death are the "unavoidable consequences." We are frequently reminded of Aylmer's Ahab-like monomania: "without intending it—nay, in spite of a purpose to the contrary—reverted to this one diasastrous topic" (p. 39), and a page later, "he had not been aware of the tyrannizing influence acquired by one idea over his mind" (p. 40). The problem with the birthmark is neither its instability, nor its uncon-

trollability, nor its mobility, but the fact that Georgiana has it and Aylmer seems to want it. The birthmark registers Georgiana's ineluctable and successful participation in the market economy. As something Georgiana possesses, the birthmark is also Georgiana, and as such it represents Georgiana's capacity to possess more, and thus it becomes what Aylmer must have. Whereas Georgiana both possesses the "charm" (p. 37) of the birthmark and is possessed by it, Aylmer is also possessed by it but receives none of the benefits of possession. He possesses it at the end of the story: after receiving assurances from Georgiana that she will drink a potentially fatal elixir, Aylmer has appropriated the power of the market that had been located in the birthmark: "his spirit was ever on the march—ever ascending—and each instant required something that was beyond the scope of the instant before" (p. 52). Capturing the spirit of Beecher and Channing, Aylmer has recaptured his ever-mobile spirit and transcendent identity by immobilizing and appropriating Georgiana's.

He succeeds in doing this by strategically manipulating the competitive principles of the market economy that inform the relations between Georgiana, himself, and the birthmark. Aylmer's anxieties about the hermeneutic fluctuations of the birthmark (as has already been suggested) are further exacerbated by the fact of its proprietary indeterminacy; in other words, to whom does the birthmark belong? Is it Georgiana's or, for that matter, Aylmer's? Is it Georgiana? Is Georgiana the birthmark's? These questions underscore the inextricable relation between matters of economy and the self at the same time that they bring us back to the task of defining Hawthorne's economics of allegory. Aylmer's project of erasure is, I think, ultimately one of ownership, requiring precisely those hermeneutic and proprietary indeterminacies that had seemed most worrisome. Anxiety-producing as they may be, these indeterminacies nevertheless enable him to sustain the belief that Georgiana and her property (that is, the birthmark) can be disengaged from one another through a process of disembodiment, and thus permit Aylmer's territorial raids upon and into Georgiana's body. Aylmer's relation to Georgiana illustrates what Macpherson has called a

"possessive market society" where "a man's energy and skill are his own, yet are regarded not as integral parts of his personality, but as possessions" (p. 48). According to this logic Aylmer assumes that Georgiana cannot both be the birthmark and possess it; therefore, he has an opportunity to own it. Similarly, in order for Georgiana to own the birthmark, she cannot be the birthmark. It is only by not owning the birthmark that she has a chance of owning it. Because her body has been constituted in the name of private property, the issue arises as to whose property she is now and whose she might become; Georgiana's body therefore functions as the site upon which the competitive spirit of the market economy plays itself out. The birthmark is Georgiana's property and as property its ownership is transferable or vulnerable, in this case to scientific experimentation. Yet as the ending of the story makes painfully clear, Georgiana *is* her property, or the birthmark. She both is it and owns it. Property that is not alienable is ultimately self-destructive. Because possession and identity are inextricable in the case of the birthmark, Georgiana commits a grave mistake in hoping that they might be separate. Interestingly enough, Aminadab puts his own finger on this logic when he first sees Georgiana lying unconscious in the laboratory: "If she were my wife, I'd never part with that birth-mark" (p. 43). Aminadab might simply be communicating his aesthetic preference for Georgiana with a birthmark as opposed to without one, but one can also hear in this sentence the inextricable connection between Georgiana's identity and the birthmark. She thinks, however, that in giving up the birthmark, she can still be a person: "Either remove this dreadful Hand, or take my wretched life!" (p. 41). Only when she realizes that her "or" will have to be an "and" will she understand what is at stake in the removal of the birthmark. The problem is not with alienable property but with property that will not be alienable.

"The Birth-mark" thus produces allegorical subjects as a consequence of applying the principles of the market economy to the relation between persons and (their) bodies. Georgiana's birthmark marks the surplus of meaning generated by the circulations of her body, which are then transformed

by Aylmer into a problem both of allegorical interpretation and economic possessiveness. What does her birthmark signify, and who owns it? That these two questions follow from one another, at least for Aylmer, suggests that allegory and the market economy share the mechanism of generating and containing surplus meaning (or value) in order to make that surplus available for possession. Once Georgiana's proprietary relation to her body unravels as a consequence of Aylmer's successful manipulation of the rules of property, an economics of allegory reveals a configuration in which the omnipotence and transcendence of one character, in this case Aylmer, depends upon the geographical and characterological immobility of others, namely Georgiana and, to a lesser extent, Aminadab. Aylmer's control over the instabilities of the market, which were most clearly embodied by Georgiana, cannot exist without precisely those instabilities that continually present the occasions for Aylmer's acts of transcendence.

In making visible the circulations of the physiological and economic systems that define the late-eighteenth-century world of Aylmer and Georgiana, the birthmark locates upon Georgiana's body a version of the market's circulatory system, whose movements are nicely depicted as Georgiana experiences "a stirring up of her system,—a strange indefinite sensation creeping through her veins, and tingling, half painfully, half pleasurably, at her heart" (p. 48). Having destroyed his wife as well as the birthmark, Aylmer has returned the market to its rightful owner—himself. His antipathy to the birthmark was never really the fact of *its* uncontrollability, but rather the fact that Georgiana was both the possessor of and the one possessed by the market's powerful uncontrollability. In the true spirit of Adam Smith, Aylmer has restored the invisibility to the hand that Georgiana had made visible.

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